



# Whose Curriculum is It Anyway?

## Decolonising the Literature Curriculum at Townley

Teacher and student **Lauren Binks** and **Anjola Akinduro** reflect on the changes that have been made to the experience of studying literature at Townley Grammar School, a state girls' school in London.

*“Townley Grammar School in Bexleyheath, in suburban southeast London, is thought to be the first state school to decolonise its curriculum, a trend confined to university campuses until now. It has also abandoned ‘racist’ hairstyle-related punishments, allowing girls to dye their hair a riot of colours from silver to purple. More than half of its pupils are from black African families and rather than sticking to a traditional ‘this is the way we’ve always done things’ mentality, as you would perhaps expect from a grammar, the school is capturing the zeitgeist and transforming what it teaches.”*

*The Times*, December 7th 2019

## The Teacher's Perspective: Seeing Race, Changing the Curriculum

**Lauren Binks** describes how and why the English department at Townley decolonised the English curriculum – and how this led to whole school changes across the curriculum and beyond.

'What made you go into teaching?' is a question often asked to those in our profession. My answer always feels a bit clichéd, but it is true nonetheless: I love my subject and I loved my experience of learning it at school. And my experience was the world of Shakespeare, Dickens, Larkin, Keats, Chaucer and Austen, to name a few: the best and worthiest of the English canon. Or so I thought.

My experience as a child in the education system exposed me to one single narrative: a white one.

Two things happened that changed my entire outlook on the way English Literature should be taught in school.

### **Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race**

Firstly, I read Reni Eddo-Lodge's book, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*. In it she says:

*'White children are taught not to 'see' race. Colour blindness does not accept the legitimacy of structural racism or a history of white racial dominance. Not seeing race does little to deconstruct racist structures or materially improve the conditions which people of colour are subject to daily.'*

"I went away from that day fearing that we were failing the students of colour in our school. Every child should find themselves in what they are being taught."

It was this colour-blindness and my own white privilege that meant I didn't question what I was being taught in schools and what I then went on to teach to my students as a teacher.

### **On Whose Terms?**

The second thing that happened, as a response to the first, was that I took a group of students to a conference at Goldsmiths University called *On Whose Terms?*, which looked at the cultural power of black British literature and the arts. I have two abiding memories from that day.

We attended a session called 'Mixed Heritages, Genre Transformations' where Goldsmith's graduates Heather Marks and Shantel Edwards spoke about the presentation of the mixed heritage experience in Amma Asante's film *Belle*, Testament's play *Black Men Walking*, and Zadie Smith's novels *White Teeth* and *Swing Time*. The minute the session finished, one of my students burst into tears and said that in her entire time of being in the education system, she'd never been in a room where someone overtly articulated her own experience. It had such a powerful and immediate effect on her because in her twelve years in education, she had never seen herself represented or had her stories told. She couldn't wait to go home and tell her dad about it.

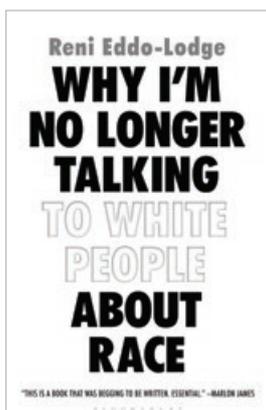
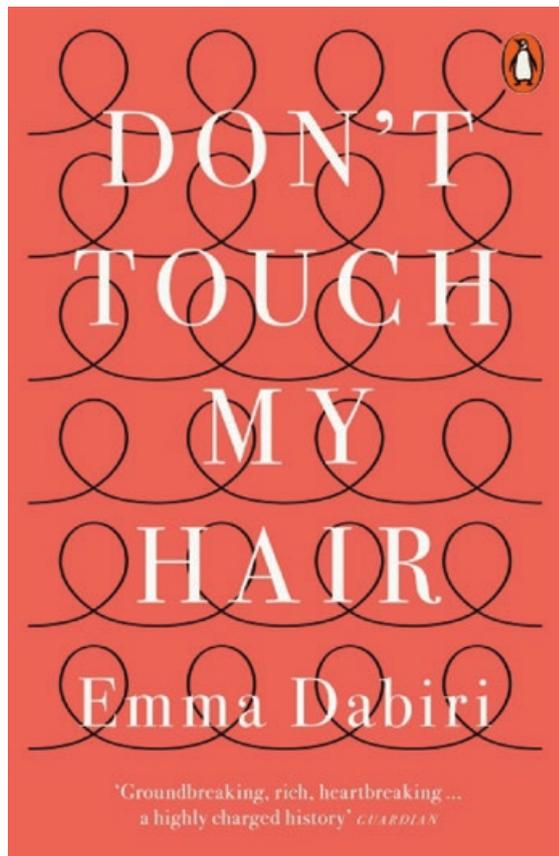
### **Whose Curriculum is it Anyway?**

Another session that resides powerfully in my memory is one led by Katy Lewis and Eva McManamon at Pearson Edexcel called 'Whose Curriculum Is It Anyway?' They opened it with this statistic: 'When 2,000 people were asked to name people they regarded as 'writers of literature', only 7% of the 400 writers named were from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds'. 'And why is this?' they asked. Because our curriculum centres around white narratives. And why is this? Here's what they argued:

1: Exam boards want to attract your business. As such, they need to produce content that teachers want to teach and so if they put texts on their specifications they know are popular with teachers (often the ones that have been taught before), schools might be more likely to pick them. And so the cycle continues.

2: Michael Gove's changes to the curriculum in 2013. He asked for a 'more nationally centred syllabus' and in doing so got rid of any non-British texts including John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. His curriculum states that:

*'Students should study a range of high-quality, intellectually challenging, and substantial whole texts in detail. These must include: at least one play by Shakespeare; at least one 19th-century novel; a selection*



of poetry since 1789, including representative Romantic poetry; and fiction or drama from the British Isles from 1914 onwards. All works should have been originally written in English.'

Arguably, what he's implicitly asking for here is a more traditional curriculum – and traditional means a curriculum dominated by white writers, usually men. You only have to look at the breakdown of the GCSE course to see this.

3: *Budget cuts.* Under austerity, schools had their budgets cut, and therefore buying new texts, for example, might not be an option. So, if you have a dusty old class set of *Animal Farm* in the cupboard, perhaps you'll choose to teach this again because you might not have the budget to buy anything new.

4: *High staff turnover.* If you have this in your school, and you have a fully planned scheme of work on *An Inspector Calls* that you know a new member of staff can just pick up and use, you might choose this as opposed to teaching something new.

5: *Performance Related Pay, targets and data.* Of course, the more we know a text, the better we teach it. So, for example, we can be confident about how to get a student a top band in *Macbeth* because we've been teaching it for years. As such, we might be reluctant to change because (a) we want the best for our students and (b) we need to 'perform' in order to satisfy the requirements of Performance Related Pay.

6: *Lack of time.* We are busy and workloads are increasingly challenging so planning entirely new units and schemes of work might not be plausible.

### Making changes

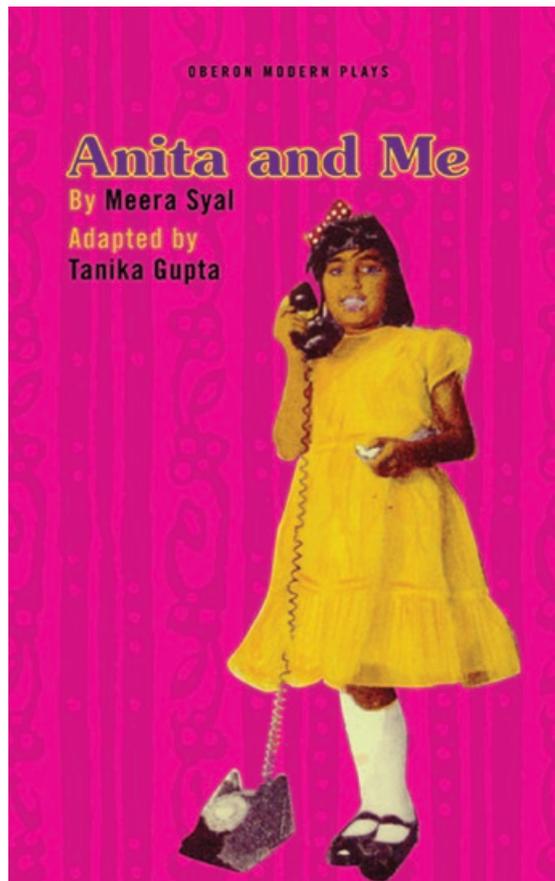
I went away from that day fearing that we were failing the students of colour in our school. If they don't see themselves in their curriculum and if they don't hear their own experiences, what are we teaching them? Every child should find themselves in what they are being taught.

I spoke to my Head of Department. She was brilliant and completely on board, so the first thing we did was analyse our current curriculum across all key stages using the following questions:

- Does our current curriculum reflect the multi-cultural society we live in?
- What does it define 'Britishness' as?
- What does it show intelligence to look like?
- Does it present under-represented groups as 'other' and 'less than'?

Reflecting on what we were teaching made us see that there was a lot of work to be done (and there still is, of course). Here are some of the changes we made:

**Year 7 Storytelling:** We had a 'Fairy Tale' unit in Year 7 and changed this to a 'Storytelling' unit where we explored how stories are told in different cultures. One of our inspirations for this was Emma Dabiri's book *Don't Touch My Hair* where she writes about how enslaved people would braid maps and messages into each other's hair in order to gain freedom. It got us discussing the different forms and traditions of storytelling, ensuring we avoided a Eurocentric approach.



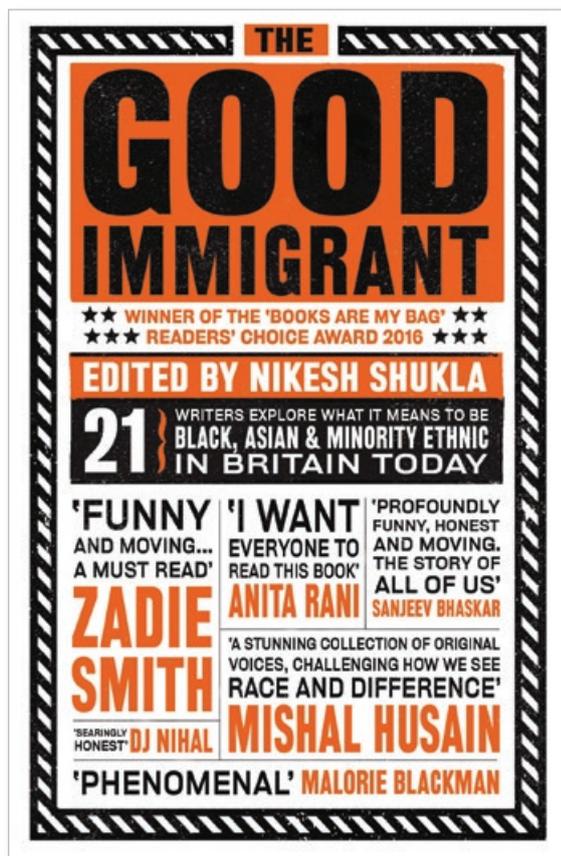
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One of the first lessons is asking the students about their experiences of storytelling; we encourage them to talk to their families about the traditions of storytelling and bring in anything interesting they have learnt about their own culture's way of telling stories. We try to really encourage interest-led learning. We added in the west-African story of *Anansi the Spider* and the Japanese story *Momotaro*, to name a few.

**Year 7 Poetry:** If you've been teaching for a while, you may remember the somewhat problematically named *Poems from Other Cultures* unit that used to be on the GCSE specification (and later became *Poems from Different Cultures*). We have added these poems into our Year 7 Programme of Study.

**Year 8 Poetry:** The students study war poetry in Year 8 and we looked at this and realised just focusing on World War One was limiting so we changed the unit to *Conflict Poetry* and added in some diverse poems from around the world including 'At the Border, 1979' by Choman Hardi, 'Nothing's Changed' by Tatamkhulu Afrika, and 'The Right Word' by Imtiaz Dharker, to name a few.

**Year 9 Poetry:** In Year 9, students now study a unit on *Protest Poetry* which culminates in them performing their own spoken word piece. This unit includes poems such as Gill Scott Heron's 'The Revolution Will Not be Televised', 'Deuce' by Rudy Francisco, and Maya Angelou's 'Still, I Rise'.



“The aim of these curriculum changes was to create a new normal where diversity was embedded into students’ everyday learning.”



**Year 9 Prose:** Students study *Anita and Me* by Meera Syal in Year 9, where we have a great deal of discussion about cultural identity.

**Year 9 Shakespeare:** In Year 9, we created a Shakespeare booklet with extracts and key soliloquies. Alongside this booklet, we teach post-colonial theory and non-fiction articles that aim to diversify their study of Shakespeare. We discuss the presentation of race, disability, gender and sexuality in his work.

**GCSE Prose:** At GCSE, we have introduced *Pigeon English* by Stephen Kelman. This is a black narrative written by a white man – and this is something we don’t shy away from discussing in class. We also talk about gang crime and racial stereotyping. This is a novel about the immigrant experience and so we discuss this and look at the media’s presentation of immigrants. It is a contemporary text that allows for contemporary issues to be debated and this, I believe, is invaluable.

**GCSE Poetry:** We have created a *Diverse Voices* unseen poetry pack for them to practice their unseen skills. We have also created resources using *A Change is Gonna Come* – a brilliant anthology of stories and poetry from BAME writers.

**GCSE Language:** We have used EMC’s *Diverse Shorts* to create Language resources, as well as Nikesh Shukla’s *The Good Immigrant* for Paper 2. When finding non-fiction articles for Paper 2, we always have our diversity drive at the forefront of our minds to ensure the students are exposed to a range of writers and diverse issues.

**A Level Literature:** At A Level, we have changed our coursework text to *The Colour Purple* and created an anthology of diverse texts to complement it, encouraging

them to choose from it for their comparative text choice. As part of their study of Alice Walker’s text, we planned lessons on the debates around white feminism in response to Walker’s ‘womanist manifesto’, black stereotypes, discussions on victim narratives (and how Walker arguably subverts these), the white saviour concept, depictions of Africa in the media, and post-colonial ideas.

**Across all key stages:** reading lists have been carefully curated to be diverse and inclusive and our library has been brilliant at promoting these.

**Edexcel’s Diversity in Literature**

There are, of course, limitations in terms of texts in Key Stage 4 and 5 dependent on the exam board’s choices. I will take a moment, though, to do a little shout-out to Edexcel here (they’re not paying me, I promise) as they have done great work to add in diverse choices at GCSE, adding texts such as *The Empress* by Tanika Gupta, *Refugee Boy* by Benjamin Zephaniah (adapted for the stage by Lemn Sissay), *Coram Boy* by Jamila Gavin, and *Boys Don’t Cry* by Malorie Blackman, as well as adding a ‘Belonging’ poetry unit, including poems that explore cultural identity. They have also produced some brilliant guides for A Level to ensure teachers and students have opportunities to engage with more diverse texts (there are three: Contemporary Black British writing, British Asian Literature, LGBTQ+ Literature). We also took some students to their *Diversity in Literature* conference this year where they had readings and performances from the writers newly added to their specification and again, the students were moved by hearing their own experiences represented.

**Student voice**

It was really important that we didn’t ignore student voice when making these changes. My amazing colleague Kirsten Aust created a student-led diversity group, which has been central to the changes made beyond the curriculum. I would recommend every school having one. The student-led group has resulted in us completely overhauling how we do Black History Month as well as scrapping our previous racist hair policies.

In terms of the curriculum changes, we asked the students what questions they would ask their teachers to consider when planning curriculum changes. Here’s what they said:

- What percentage of what you teach is white male?
- Is your teaching representative of the class you see in front of you?
- Is the white male presented as the pinnacle of intellectual thought?
- What did you learn at school and what are you teaching now? What does this mean in terms of progress?
- If you’re teaching anything about Africa, do you only look at the victim narrative? Do the topic choices perpetuate stereotypes?
- Do we teach the effects of the British Empire and colonisation enough?
- Are all topics therefore Eurocentric and westernised? Are white ‘movements’, thinking and influences seen as superior?

### A new normal

The aim of these curriculum changes was to create a new normal where diversity was embedded into students' everyday learning. This meant that it had to be more than just the English department doing this. I pitched this to my SLT and they were hugely supportive in encouraging all departments to do the same – and the response from staff was brilliant.

As a result, a huge number of changes have been made across all subjects and key stages. Here are just a few:

In **Art**, they added a 'Black Heroes' project, analysed the artists they have studied, and created debates about the prevalence of 'dead white men' in art.

In **History**, they added units on Immigration in the UK, Kings and Queens around the World, Sophia Duleep Singh and Black Lives Matter, the British Empire, and study of India.

In **MFL**, vocabulary taught for specific topics was adapted – e.g., adding mosque/temple/synagogue when introducing places in town, or adding food from French speaking countries rather than just France when introducing French food.

In **Drama and Dance**, a showcase was inspired by a variety of diverse writers including Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*.

In **Latin**, they added a study of the diverse population of Roman Alexandria, and how issues of nationality and citizenship impacted the daily lives and experiences of these people.

In **Classical Civilisation**, they added a focus on the legal status of Metics in Classical Athens, and how their status as outsiders and lack of citizenship impacted their lives.

Staff also consider the smaller, everyday changes such as displays. In displays, what do the scientists

and mathematicians look like, for example? What role models are students seeing? (Pearson's diversity website 'Nevertheless' – <https://www.pearson.com/news-and-research/the-future-of-education/podcasts/nevertheless.html> – has produced brilliant printable posters of diverse women of colour in STEM.) Staff also consider the images they use on their PowerPoints and what they mean in terms of representation.

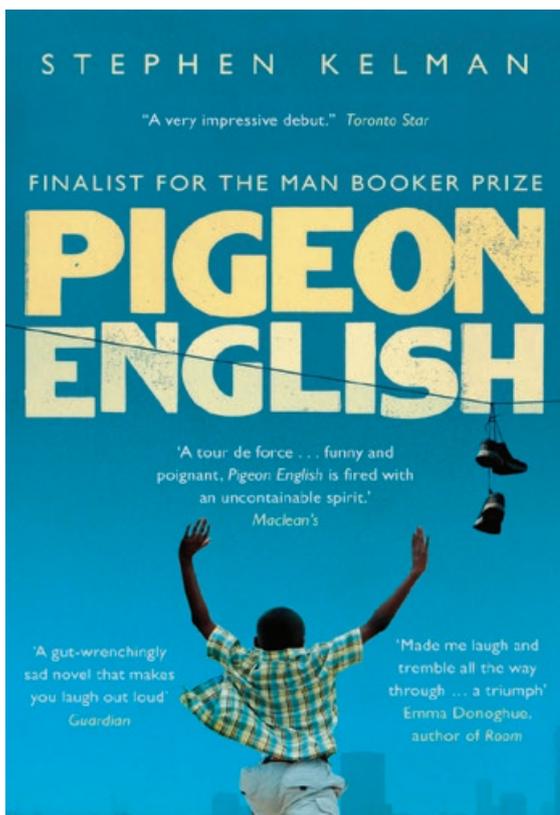
### The naysayers

In my experience of making these changes, staff have been brilliant and supportive, but, if you are thinking about making changes in your school, prepare for the following from a few:

**What about the white students?** To which my answer is, what *about* them? Every child should be exposed to a wealth of experiences and voices. The more diverse voices, the more we learn. Surely if we are doing our jobs correctly, we want to raise a generation who understand different stories and voices and are socially conscious. I'll quote Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's closing line of her TED talk *The Danger of a Single Story* here: 'When we reject the single story, when we realise that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.' A utopian ideal perhaps, but what Adichie might be asking us to do here is to consider what society could look like if everyone had a voice. Where better to promote that than in the classroom?

**But An Inspector Calls is a work of genius! You can't not teach them Shakespeare!** Yes, of course these texts have stood the test of time, and of course they are still important. But who decides what writers are worthy? Who decides what makes the English canon? Our curriculum is a hangover from colonial ideas about what 'worthy' looks like. In decolonising the curriculum, we decolonise the mind.

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### And finally...

We must start seeing the overwhelming whiteness of the current curriculum for what it is: a construct wholly separate from the lives of many of the students in front of us. Returning to Reni Eddo-Lodge, she writes:

*‘In order to dismantle unjust, racist structures, we must see race. We must see who benefits from their race, who is disproportionately impacted by negative stereotypes about their race, and who power and privilege is bestowed upon – earned or not – because of their race, their class and their gender. Seeing race is essential to changing the system.’*

And it is this questioning of systemic racism within education, this ‘seeing race’ that is central to the process of changing the curriculum from an archaic product of colonial thought to something that is both empowering and inspiring in the 21st century.

### Lauren Binks

is Key Stage 5 Coordinator of English and Film Studies at Townley Grammar School.

## The Student's Perspective: Experiencing a Diverse Curriculum

Townley A Level student **Anjola Akinduro** argues that a diverse curriculum has enriched her experience of literature and helped her to understand a range of perspectives and issues.

Literature is generally perceived as a reflection of realities in society: however, until the last 40 or so years, this has seldom been the case: white upper and middle-class male authors have repeatedly been the dominant focus of attention. But postmodern Western society is a melting pot of varied cultures and beliefs, and therefore it is important that the media used to portray our world represent it as accurately and inclusively as possible.

### Lessons from a restricted curriculum

The curriculum plays a crucial role in socialisation, helping students learn appropriate ways to engage with their world. However, the lack of representation caused by the way it has been built narrowly upon a white middle-class habitus (as reflected in the way children have been taught and assessed for many years) inevitably leads to a skewed worldview and a lack of agency for other narratives. This can severely limit understanding of common socio-cultural concepts.

The BBC adaptation of the book *Noughts and Crosses* by Malorie Blackman is a case in point. We are confronted with a fictional world built upon the colonial supremacy of the 'Aprican' (a deliberate reconfiguration of 'African') continent. There is an elaborate reimagining of London which is characterised by the alienation and demonisation of white citizens, the 'Noughts'. They are degraded and marginalised by a dominant and oppressive Afro-centric system, in a poignant subversion of the all-too-familiar reality of the treatment of minority groups. This portrayal of systemic discrimination was met with outrage. Some critics and viewers took to social media with scathing reviews: Malorie Blackman's depiction was 'anti-white', 'racist', and unjustly critical of our current society.

Having sometimes witnessed refusal to accept the existence of inequality in society – both institutionally and through microaggressions – I paid little attention to the uproar. I did ponder, though, the reasons why the topic of inequality always appears to evoke controversy in certain quarters. Arguably it shouldn't require an extreme subversion like *Noughts and Crosses* to gain insight into the afflictions of the marginalised, but the testy reactions speak volumes on how much societal progress is still needed. Perhaps the poor reception is due to the reality that (intentionally or unintentionally) we perceive the male white ethnocentric lens as the main lens through which society can be viewed. Such perceptions often fail to account for individual experiences of disability, race, class, gender and sexuality, and even age-based differences.

### My experience of a diversified curriculum

This is why notable steps have been taken to diversify the curriculum at my school and elsewhere, foremost of which is an intentional deviation from the male-

framed narratives that previously dominated the world of literature and literary studies. Alongside Shakespeare and pre-19th century poetry in my GCSE and A Level English courses, I have also had the opportunity to explore a number of literary works which have enriched my literary learning in very different ways. Here I will discuss two – Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* and Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*.

### *A Taste of Honey*

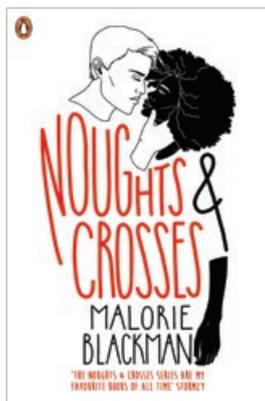
This 1950s play navigates the world of a 17-year-old working-class teenager from Salford (Jo), looked after by a single (and perhaps promiscuous) mother (Helen), and due to give birth to the bi-racial child of an absentee Nigerian father. She later prepares to raise the child with her homosexual roommate, Geoff. The play offers insight into several complex issues and experiences – concerning class, race, gender and sexual orientation – and thus serves as a progressive narrative (in contrast with the discriminatory time period in which it is set) by representing several groups in society.

For instance, we see how the status of the 'teenager' was slowly becoming acknowledged by society as a separate identity, independent from the control of the older generation. This concept is embodied in the character of Jo, who, constantly frustrated by her lack of agency and freedom, strives to be autonomous – recognised in her own right and having an impact on the world around her.

We also see the condemnation of non-nuclear families at the time, as well as attitudes towards pre-marital sexual relationships. Helen has long since abandoned all hopes of being an archetypal mother, having also given birth at a young age. Her admission to being an unfit maternal figure offers us insight into the plight of women in the 20th century. As a young girl, she would have been expected to marry in pursuit of social security, even if that meant entering a loveless marriage and seeking sexual gratification elsewhere, which of course renders her a social pariah. Jo treads a similar path, although her situation is much more dire within her context, as she is impregnated and then abandoned by a black sailor. The ostracism of biracial children and interracial relationships during the time is made clear to students through Helen's numerous disdainful comments towards the baby's heritage in the closing moments of the play. Thus we witness how the condemnation Jo experiences is essentially three-fold: she is a teenager, a single mother, and a participant of an interracial relationship, with life-long consequences.

As a young learner, it was inspiring for me to see the aspirations of youth (a notion still relevant today, but widely ignored at the time of the play) accurately represented in a postmodern curriculum. It was also surprising to see the representation of a single-mother household without Delaney condemning it.

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Instead, Helen and Jo's family structure is used to critique 20th century attitudes which shamed lone motherhood.

Additionally, we see an unusually progressive depiction of a black male character at the time. Although Jimmy later leaves Jo, his characterisation is antithetical to the negative stereotypes of the black man. Instead of being a hyper-sexual, bestial villain in the narrative, Jimmy is arguably the most caring character towards Jo in the play. He offers more maternal comfort than even the young girl's mother does. Stereotypical ideas regarding gay men are also challenged through the characterisation of Geoff. Rather than being presented as sexually promiscuous, he is instead portrayed as a caring and patient friend.

### **The Colour Purple**

My scope was widened even more when we compared *The Colour Purple* with a secondary text of our own choice. The freedom of coursework allowed us to explore vastly different topics, and we were able to see how various forms of diversity tend to intersect, both within characters and across texts.

Celie, the protagonist of the novel, juggles many different aspects of herself: her gender identity, her experience as a black woman, her sexual identity, and the manner in which all of these align with her spiritual and religious identities. Using what we had learnt about feminist, womanist and post-colonial theories, we were able to appreciate this realistic portrayal of black women as victims of both patriarchy and racism.

Walker's tale managed to remain uplifting overall, however. The reader first encounters Celie as a weak and damaged teenager. The victim of rape by her stepfather, she is left sexually and psychologically subjugated despite the physical and political emancipation of black slaves years before. She struggles to reconcile her terrible life experiences with the merciful and just God-image that she constantly is forced to consume. She is not only oppressed due to racial differences, but also doubly subdued due to her femininity. It is through other women in the novel that Celie begins to rebuild her identity. Through her husband's former lover, Shug Avery, Celie reclaims and takes pride in her own sexual identity. Sofia, her stepson's wife, inspires Celie to stand up for herself and defy gender oppression after Celie witnesses her tenacious resistance to masculine violence. Celie redefines her religious identity, transforming it from a fear-driven subservience to a spiritually intimate relationship with God.

Celie's development is directly inspired by Walker's fundamental philosophies, which is why studying the lives of diverse authors is as important as exploring the fictional narratives themselves. We looked at the author's *Womanist Manifesto*, which explores what it means to be an impactful Black Feminist and woman. In it, Walker highlights the importance of black women loving each other in the midst of all the injustice against them. It is only when they find genuine strength and solace in each other that the effects of oppression will be overcome. This is an aspiration that particularly speaks to me – and I believe it can be applied to all backgrounds and experiences.

We also considered the well-known 'Bechdel Test' in our lessons, which critiques the role of women in fiction. It asks whether there are at least two women in any fictional work, and then examines whether those female characters do or say anything other than what may bolster the importance of the men in the story.

Walker certainly exceeds the expectations of this test: she crafts a network of women, who are characters with their own personalities, experiences and motivations. This makes their influence in Celie's life even more poignant and offers a realistic representation of the strength of the black woman.

It was refreshing to study a novel that explores all facets of the diaspora experience rather than dwelling solely on the negative aspects. The narrative arc is hopeful and uplifting, as Celie ends up being a happy, successful, and autonomous woman who is proud of every part of her identity. These kind of storylines are vital to Afro-Caribbean people throughout Britain and America, as it enables them to realise that their existence is not epitomised by struggle and pain. It also serves to educate those from different cultures and extend their perspectives.

### **Rethinking the Literature Curriculum**

My experience of a diversified curriculum in class has been deeply enriching for both my academic work and my personal identification with literary voices who share similar backgrounds to me. It has also allowed me to learn more about the experiences of those with whom I do not share similar backgrounds. This opportunity should be made accessible to all students.

How can this be achieved? Perhaps one method is by adding reading lists of modern texts to the curriculum that explore various aspects of diversity. Schemes like this can be particularly effective for Key Stage 3 students, who are not formally assessed on the texts they read. This would widen their scope from a young age; without the pressure of learning the content for exams, they can engage with the texts personally and at a leisurely pace.

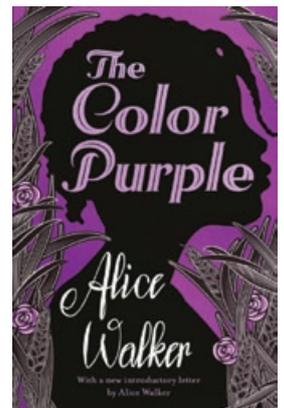
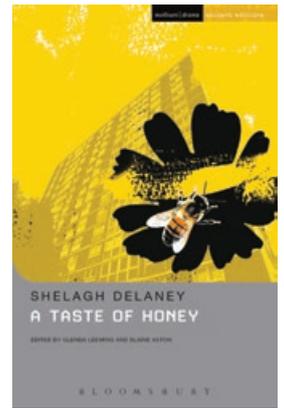
There is a long way to go until the curriculum is fully diverse. For instance, there continues to be a notable absence of disability representation in the English Literature curriculum, as well as Asian (especially Southern Asian) and Latinx (Latina/Latino) narratives. The GCSE and A Level contemporary poetry anthologies would also benefit from more diversity. Although we studied poems by the likes of British-Indian poet Daljit Nagra and the bisexual Nigerian-British poet Patience Agbabi, more work needs to be done here.

Moreover, a diverse curriculum should not be limited to only literary studies. For example, the History curriculum in the UK predominantly focuses on European and American history, with only brief – and sometimes dismissive – mentions of other cultures. By including diverse narratives in our curriculum, we may be able to make society more cohesive and empathetic towards each other's differences, thus reducing the negative consequences that often arise from a lack of understanding.

We do not have a choice concerning who we share planet Earth with, and thus we must make an effort to learn about the numerous, varying perspectives of our co-habitants. We are lucky to live in an era of increasing interconnectedness, which means that there is nothing prohibiting us from learning about the experiences of other people. Invaluable information about other societies is more accessible now than ever through technology. What better way to explore it than through an inclusive curriculum that will benefit both present and future generations?

**Anjola Akinduro**

is a Year 13 student at Townley Grammar School



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